

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY  
INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES GIBSON ON ABC-TV PROGRAM, "GOOD MORNING AMERICA"  
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CHARLES GIBSON: In spite of President Clinton's new closed-door policy aimed at blocking Cuban refugees from entering the U.S., they keep coming -- "a tidal wave of people," is how Defense Secretary William Perry describes it.

Yesterday, the Secretary was Key West, Florida, and later at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba for a firsthand look at the operation. This morning he's back, and he's joining us now this morning from the Pentagon. Mr. Secretary, good morning.

SEC. PERRY: Good morning, Charlie.

MR. GIBSON: As I understand it, 2,465 refugees picked up just yesterday in the Florida straits?

SEC. PERRY: That's correct.

MR. GIBSON: The message has been emphatic for two days -- those people leaving would not reach the U.S.. Obviously, they don't believe it.

SEC. PERRY: Well, the people that were picked up in the last few days are people that set off Friday and Saturday. You see, the boats drift for a couple of days before they're picked up. Most of these people are not setting off in powered rafts -- in powered boats, but in

very makeshift rafts, some of them even in large rubber inner tubes, and so it takes them a few days to drift to the area where they're picked up.

MR. GIBSON: But is it so certain, Mr. Secretary, that those people won't eventually get here?

SEC. PERRY: Those people are going to Guantanamo Bay. They have very little prospect of coming to the United States. So, first of all, it's a dangerous operation for them, going out in the open seas in these makeshift rafts, and, secondly, the prospect is going to Guantanamo, not going to the United States.

MR. GIBSON: Well, I understand, but eventually, the question is, where do they wind up? I mean, can you say emphatically, unequivocally, they will never get to the United States? Because obviously they have hopes.

SEC. PERRY: That is our message, and that is why we're trying to discourage the people from leaving.

I think our message is going to get across, Charlie. As I said, the people who are -- we've been picking up in the last few days have not really heard that message yet.

MR. GIBSON: But where will they eventually wind up? I mean, what is the eventual disposition for these people? Is it indefinitely being held in Guantanamo? Is it the intention to return them to mainland Cuba?

SEC. PERRY: There are several alternatives. Certainly an alternative is return. Another alternative is moving them to another safe haven. That's yet to be determined.

MR. GIBSON: But will this be indefinitely if we hold them at Guantanamo or at another safe haven?

SEC. PERRY: We can hold them indefinitely in Guantanamo. I certainly would not recommend that. It's a very unattractive proposition for the Cubans themselves. There's nothing, really, for them to do at Guantanamo. It'll be a boring and a frustrating activity, which is, again, one of the reasons we're urging the people not to leave.

MR. GIBSON: Well, but, Mr. Secretary, they leave because of great economic hardship at home. You say there's very little chance they'll

get here, but perhaps in their minds, that's a better prospect than staying, and then we add on to this the fact that we now impose sanctions on Cuba -- the greater the economic hardships that are there, doesn't that increase the likelihood that people will flee?

SEC. PERRY: We can't be sure why the people are fleeing, Charlie. I think the economic hardship they're facing is certainly a major component for many of them, and the major hardship -- economic problems in Cuba are the problems caused by the Cuban government, primarily, not by the embargo proposed by the United States. I mean, the government is a flawed and a failed government.

MR. GIBSON: But don't we add to those hardships, is really what I'm asking, by imposing those sanctions?

SEC. PERRY: Yes, the embargo does add to those hardships. It certainly makes it more difficult for the government to function there.

MR. GIBSON: You were down in Guantanamo yesterday. We now have 15,000 Haitians there, presumably an open-ended situation with their being held. We'll soon have, perhaps, 10,000 Cubans there. How stable is the situation at Guantanamo?

SEC. PERRY: There are something over 14,000 Haitians there, somewhat fewer than the 15,000 you mentioned, because some of them have been repatriated in the last week. It's a situation which for the Haitians, I'm sure, is frustrating and boring. They would like to come to the United States, and instead they're being held in Guantanamo. They have very little to do. Both the military and the private relief organizations working down there are setting up educational programs and recreational programs, but still, it's frustrating.

When I was there yesterday, there was a demonstration by, oh, I would guess six (hundred) or 700 of the Haitians. It was a peaceful demonstration, but, nevertheless, I think it did represent their frustration.

MR. GIBSON: Mr. Secretary, I appreciate your joining us. Always good to have you here. Thank you --

SEC. PERRY: Thank you, Charlie.

MR. GIBSON: -- for being with us this morning.